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ABSTRACT

This booklet outlines a vision as to how the Children's Parliament can become a more powerful, representative, and effective forum to advocate for children's rights in Zimbabwe. Written by a group of current and former child parliamentarians, the booklet is meant to provoke comment and reflection, and to prompt a start among policy makers, ministry officials, non-governmental organizations and young people themselves in ensuring that the Children's Parliament lives up to the high ideals that informed its creation in 1990. The booklet is a compilation of child parliamentarians' experiences to date, and it also incorporates the views of other children who have had no contact with parliament as to what they might expect from such an institution. The booklet is divided into the following sections: "Preface"; "Acknowledgments"; "Introduction"; "The Background of the Children's Parliament"; "Individual Experiences"; "Shortfalls of the Children's Parliament"; "Recommendations"; and "Conclusion." (BT)

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Our right to be

HEARD

Save the Children

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"Our Right To Be Heard"

Voices from Child Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe

Save the Children

"Our Right To Be Heard"

Voices from Child Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe

Compiled by

Gina B Masala (Child President, 1998–1999)

Yvonne P C Mugochi (Speaker of Parliament, 1998–1999)

Kenneth Gambiza (Member of Parliament, 1996–1997)

Kudakwashe Mudenge (Member of Parliament, 1999–2000)

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Preface

Last year, at the Book Fair in Harare, the then Child President, Gina Masala, officiated at the launch of a Save the Children (SCF) publication dealing with the situation in informal urban settlements. During the subsequent discussions she was asked about the role of the Children's Parliament, and what her experiences had been.

While the formation of a Children's Parliament in 1990 was generally welcome, Gina indicated that both she and other MPs felt that it had the potential to offer much more. They lamented the fact that it did not meet more frequently, that the parliament was not known about by other children, that adults did not seem to take their deliberations very seriously, and that it received rather meagre coverage in the media, with some journalists referring to their activities under the title 'mock parliament'.

In response to these observations, SCF invited Gina to convene a group of current and former child parliamentarians to compile a document on their experiences to date. This document was to outline their vision as to how the Children's Parliament could become a more powerful, and a more representative and effective forum to advocate children's views in Zimbabwe.

This booklet is the result of their deliberations. It also incorporates the views of other children, who have had no contact with parliament, as to what they might expect from such an institution.

This publication is meant to provoke critical comment and reflection. It does not provide a blueprint on how exactly such a parliament can be created. But we hope that it will prompt a start among policy makers, ministry officials, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and young people themselves in ensuring that the Children's Parliament lives up to the high ideals that informed its creation. At its best it offers children in

Zimbabwe, regardless of their economic, social, ethnic or geographical status, a forum to have their voices heard on issues that affect them – a principle enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Zimbabwe was a signatory in 1990:

Article 12:

'States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of informing his or her views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.

Article 13:

'The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice'.

Chris McIvor
SCF Programme Director
Zimbabwe.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to all the people who made possible the production of this document. We are particularly happy that the adults involved in the process acted mainly as guides or facilitators. We are most grateful for the financial support we received from Save The Children (UK) which we entirely depended upon for our meetings, research and the actual production of this document. Our thanks extend specifically to the SCF (UK) technical team, namely Mrs Charity Manyau, Mrs Mary Chinyenze Daniel, Mrs Tisa Chifunyise, and to the director, Mr Chris McIvor. Thanks also to Ros Wilson for her assistance in editing the document.

Not all parents allow their children to take part in extra curriculum activities, let alone speak out their minds in a world where everyone is scrambling for their rights, and for their voices to be heard. For this we want to thank the following people – our parents – for their unwavering support:

Mr and Mrs Ambrick, Mr and Mrs Gambara, Mr and Mrs Gambiza, Mr and Mrs Gora, Mr and Mrs Masala, Mr and Mrs Mudenge, Mr and Mrs Mugochi, Mr and Mrs Saurombe and Mr and Mrs Vambe.

Our profound thanks go to our former schools and to the schools at which we consulted with other children; these are:

Binga Secondary, Hwange Government, Mazowe Boys High, Mount Pleasant High, Nyamhunga Secondary, Nyamuzuwe Secondary, Nyazura High, Pashu Primary, Porta Farm Primary, St David's Girls, Bonda; Zezani High.

We are also thankful to both the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare and to the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives for providing us with information on the Children's Parliament, as well as clarifying some child rights issues.

To those whom we have not mentioned, but who may have been part of the process, we are greatly indebted to you all.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), signed by our government in 1989, was a turning point in the history of those citizens of Zimbabwe who are legitimately classified as children – those citizens under the age of 18 years. A year later, the first children's parliamentary session was staged.

- Does this mean that children have the right to do whatever they want, without their parents' consent?
- To young spoilt brats, does this mean they can party all night, drink alcohol and smoke their lungs out and, if parents complain, the law will protect them from being punished accordingly?
- Does this mean young boys and girls can indulge in pre-marital sex, with parents being unable to do anything about it?

Were these the questions in your mind when you first heard about the Children's Parliament?

It is ten years since the Children's Parliament was put in place, and yet most Zimbabweans have virtually no idea of the significance of this event, or know anything about this institution.

In this document, we seek to enlighten our fellow countrymen who are still in the dark. We wish to instill in them an appreciation of the fact that the Children's Parliament is a legitimate body, not a mere charade set out to cause chaos and havoc in families by creating and nurturing little academic monsters, or monsters supported by legislation in the name of children. What is of importance, however, is for people to realise how the Children's Parliament could change the lives of many Zimbabwean children.

As we come to a time when human predators are on the prowl with, unfortunately, their prey being children who are relentlessly being abused, we need representatives, among children, to stand up and fight for their rights.

It is our fervent hope that we will be able to bring out the reality of just how your children, and future generations of children, can benefit from this worthwhile cause. We also hope that you will join us in helping our Children's Parliament to become more effective and better recognised.

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The Background of the Children's Parliament

To the ordinary citizen, it might seem melodramatic to hear and see children speak up for their rights in a 'parliament', hence the term 'mock parliament' has often been used in reference to the Zimbabwe Children's Parliament. Although this might have been the general perception of the Children's Parliament, the history of its origin opposes this view, as it shows the adult world's concern to issues relating to children.

One may ask why a Children's Parliament when we have a real adult Parliament? Back in 1990, leaders from 191 countries came together at a world summit for children in New York, USA, and set out goals to be reached by the year 2000. These were basically to eradicate various health, economic and other problems that made it difficult to implement child rights. In summary, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) covers child survival, development, and participation and protection issues. Since the ratification of the UNCRC by almost all the countries of the world, except the United States of America and Somalia, movements and programmes, championing the rights of the child, have been launched. This has resulted in the UNCRC being identified as the only document that is clear and comprehensive on what the world community wants for its children. This is because the UNCRC is unique as it embodies, all in this one document, the child's political, economic, cultural and civil rights, making it different from other existing conventions.

The unanimous adoption of the UNCRC by the United Nations General Assembly on the 20th of November, 1989 implied that the condescending attitudes of some adults towards children had to change. The welfare of children is no longer spurred on by compassion alone; it is a mandate supported by almost all the nations of the world.

Is the Zimbabwean child included?

The President of Zimbabwe, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, attended the World

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Summit for Children held in New York in September 1990, when nations set out goals to be reached by the year 2000. These were in relation to the UNCRC. Member states signed their allegiance to the convention and so did our President. This made Zimbabwe a party to the UNCRC. So, the Zimbabwean child is not just included, but is expected to be an active member of the cause.

The UNCRC galvanised many nations into action, and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in 1990, drafted its Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. In the same year, heads of the OAU came together and decided to set aside a date on which to address issues affecting the African child. On this day – the 16th of June – known as the Day of the African Child, children are given the opportunity to speak out on issues affecting them. This has to be done with adults acting only as guides or facilitators.

One may wonder why the 16th of June? This day was chosen because, back in 1976 – on the same date – school children were massacred in the Soweto uprising, in South Africa, for demanding educational and other rights. This sad memory lingers on in the hearts and minds of the African people. With this in mind, Zimbabwe chose to inaugurate the Children's Parliament in order to provide a platform for children to air their views and, most importantly, to have those views seriously considered.

How is it done?

A theme is chosen, annually, for the Day of the African Child; this is sent out to member states of the OAU. Deliberations for the day are based on the chosen theme, focusing, normally, on issues predominantly affecting the African child and child rights issues, such as child labour, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In Zimbabwe, the theme is sent to all the nine provinces of the country.

For each constituency, potential members of the Children's Parliament are chosen in schools and they compete, basically, through speechwriting and public speaking, to represent their constituency at the parliamentary session.

Delegates are chosen from both primary and secondary schools. There is no gender bias. These delegates are then officially known as Child Members

of Parliament for the duration of their one-year tenure of office. The delegates meet at provincial offices of the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives. From there they are transported to Harare, the capital.

Since the formation of the Children's Parliament in 1990, the deliberations of the Day of the African Child have been conducted – until 1999 – in the ZANU (PF) hall. In 1999, the children's parliamentary session was hosted at the Parliament of Zimbabwe buildings.

The delegates spend three days at the conference. On day one they arrive and settle in. Day two is reserved for rehearsals, and on day three the parliamentary session is staged. During this session, after the Child President has addressed the house, Child MPs are allocated two minutes each to speak on the chosen theme. Adult ministers attend this session, and respond to the parliamentarians' contributions after the debate session is over. The President attends if he is available. On the next day, the Child President and his/her Members of Parliament return to their respective schools.

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Individual Experiences

The youths who put this document together were members of the Children's Parliament from four different sessions. They tell us how they were chosen to represent their constituencies:

Yvonne P C Mugochi
Speaker of Parliament
Constituency: Harare North
Year: 1998

'My selection was either through fate, or luck, or both. A letter came from the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives requesting a female delegate to represent Harare East constituency. Mount Pleasant High, the school I attended, is in Harare North but the school was chosen all the same. The task of selecting the delegate was left to the head of the Guidance and Counselling Department. He chose me since I was the head girl at the time. I had formerly been doing public speaking and had proven to be fluent and outspoken.

'During the rehearsals, which were part of the preparations for the Day of the African Child celebrations, the chaperones simply selected a few students from among us to speak in parliament, and I was one of them. Then, I was told I was the Child Speaker of Parliament.

'My opinions of the day really are nothing but the truth. Our discussion was only a presentation by a few students; it was not really a discussion. Afterwards we were taken sightseeing and that was it.'

Gina B Masala
Child President
Constituency: Matabeleland South
Year: 1998

I never thought my decision to take part in the last round of a public speaking competition would qualify me for the post of Child President. This means

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that I took part only in the impromptu speeches. I must admit that I did not do very well. All the same, my literature teacher became interested in coaching me for public speaking since he was quite sure he had identified some talent in me.

He helped me master the basic skills, and soon I was chosen to represent my school, Zezani High, in a competition for schools in and around Beitbridge.

I came first in that competition and qualified to compete at regional level. In the regional finals I came first among the girls. A few days following a competition sponsored by Enbee, in which I came first, I received a call from the regional office, informing me that my achievements in public speaking had automatically qualified me for the post of Child President.

Besides being involved in public speaking, I was features editor for the school magazine and a member of the Interact Club. Being chosen to occupy this post was an experience of a lifetime. Surprisingly, I was not aware of the existence of a Children's Parliament before then.

Kenneth Gambiza Moyo
Constituency: Matabeleland North
Year: 1997

The message that our school had to select a delegate to represent the constituency at the Children's Parliament session came a week before the commemoration of the Day of the African Child.

Our deputy headmistress made a tour of all the form four classes, explaining what the big day was all about. She gave us an essay topic and invited those who were interested to write. She further said that she was going to assess all the essays written by the interested individuals. Five students were going to be short-listed, and would be interviewed. The main areas she was going to look at were responsibility, intelligence and confidence.

I was among the five short-listed students, being one of two students who had excelled. The headmaster asked if we could afford to fund ourselves for the journey to Bulawayo. Both of us could and this made it difficult for the headmaster to choose between the two of us. However, after realising she was not confident enough to address a large gathering, my colleague stepped down, and I automatically became Child Member of Parliament. I was used to reading the Bible at assembly and figured I really had nothing to fear.

Kudakwashe Mudenge
Member of Parliament
Constituency: Mazowe West
Year: 1999

The year 1999 saw the selection of a young, diligent and eloquent man as the Child Member of Parliament for Mazowe West Constituency. The young man was Kudakwashe Mudenge, and that Kudakwashe Mudenge is me.

In 1999, Mazowe High School made a very big impact in the Jaycees Inter-High Schools' Debate Competition, and I happened to be the third speaker in the debating team from my school. I also came first in the Mazowe District Public Speaking Competition, and that is when I was selected for the Children's Parliament, about which I knew next-to-nothing.

Later, the theme was given and, being a biology student, looking into AIDS issues did not require much effort.

At the parliamentary session, I was nominated to speak for my province due to my reputation. Unfortunately, I knew very little about the constituency since I come from Gweru, but being a public speaker of considerable experience, I came up with something based on assumptions. On the whole, it was all very enjoyable.

Jean Gora
Member of Parliament
Constituency: Mutasa (Manicaland Province)
Year: 1999

I am the Child Member of Parliament for the year 1999 – 2000.

When the school was informed that it had to send a delegate for the Children's Parliament, the teacher assigned to do this, thought I was the best choice. This was mainly because I am eloquent when it comes to issues I feel passionately about. On the other hand, my deputy headmaster thought this was unfair as he presumed that I had been chosen because I was the head girl.

It was, therefore, decided that a contest on the best speech, based on the year's theme for the Children's Parliament, be staged.

I made a lot of people aware of the pending competition. We shared ideas and wrote our speeches. The ten of us who were interested were requested to present our speeches to a panel of judges, consisting of two teachers and several students. It was stiff competition as all the girls – my school is a single sex school – acquitted themselves well.

I am sure you are already aware of who won since I have already stated my present status. So here I am, basically, because my speech was the best.

Ian Ambrick
Member of Parliament
Constituency: Kariba
Year: 1998

Initially, the adult Member of Parliament for Kariba, Mr S. Chandengenda, visited a combined assembly at our school to give us some career guidance. After the career guidance session, he introduced the issue of Child Members of Parliament and gave us a detailed background of the Children's Parliament. He then informed us that he wanted a Child Member of Parliament from our school. The person had to be in form three, a non-prefect, and be good in English language and literature, and history.

Three students were nominated, including myself. We were tasked to study various issues concerning our constituency, and were interviewed afterwards.

The interview was manageable and I passed it. This came as a shock to me but to my relief, an uncle of mine, formerly a student at my school, had also been chosen Child Member of Parliament years before.

I was then officially announced Child Member of Parliament for Kariba, and I was over the moon with joy. I gained more respect from my friends and teachers, save for some rude boys who teased me a lot. I was asked to write a speech on child labour and some amendments were made to it.

When I presented my speech in parliament, I panicked, as it was the first time I had addressed such a massive and mixed assembly consisting, even, of Ministers. All the same, everything was interesting.

Oliver Saurombe
Member of Parliament
Constituency: Makoni East
Year: 1998

It was in June 1998 that my school headmaster received a letter he said was from the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives, requesting him to select the most appropriate student to enter a competition for the selection of new members of the Children's Parliament.

The basic criterion for my nomination was my competence in the English language, coupled with my generally impressive academic performance. The only preparation I was to make was the writing of a speech on child labour. The speech was to be as detailed as possible and to be presented within the limit of five minutes.

I had no basic, let alone, detailed information on how one became a Child Member of Parliament or what was expected of me. From the way it was relayed to me, my confidence in English was my only tool of trade.

I was very nervous and oblivious of my exact mission. I, however, managed to make it through the session. Things would have been a lot easier for me as a Child MP if I had received better clarification of my duties, as this would have helped me fulfil my ministry to the children of Zimbabwe.

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Shortfalls of the Children's Parliament

Selection of Child Members of Parliament and of the Child President

There is no clear criteria for the selection of the above mentioned. Child MPs, and even the Child President, are chosen by virtue of being head boys or head girls of their schools, their competence in the English language, academic performance, eloquence, responsibility status and other qualities. It is not clear who should conduct the selection and how they should go about it.

Over the years, there has been a lack of representation of 'out of school' youths and yet this is a platform from which all the youths in this country may be able to air their views and make their concerns known. The youths who are out of school are not only those who are through with their education but are those who have been denied the right to education. Leaving them out, is denying them yet another right – that of freedom of expression.

> *'If there is no sort of involvement of out-of-school youths, then what is being done is very unfair as it implies that the views of the youths out of school are not important'.*– 17-year-old Cheusi, an out-of school youth from Mutorashanga.

Cheusi's opinion is shared by many other youths in Zimbabwe, who are either through with their education or have not been fortunate enough to attend school.

Deliberations

a) The Zimbabwe Children's Parliament is supposed to be staged on the 16th of June, each year, to commemorate the Day of the African Child. In past years, this has not been so. It is our understanding that the session has normally been postponed so that the President, Robert

Gabriel Mugabe, can attend. In cases where he may be engaged in carrying out other duties, the session is delayed sometimes by over a month. The session is not, therefore, staged on the date of the commemoration of the Day of the African Child.

b) Often, Child MPs are booked into hostels according to the regions from which they come. This tends to create tribal disparities amongst Child MPs and has resulted in tribal groups being formed.

c) A day before the parliamentary session, the Child MPs and Child President rehearse the activities of the following day, and they have no time for discussions. Because the choice of Child MPs has been due to their ability as public speakers they are often unwilling to disclose information to others, since they feel it is some form of competition. Some will even be thinking they are contesting for the 'presidential' post.

Education of Child Members of Parliament and of the Child President

Soon after their selection, the Child MPs go to parliament to represent their respective constituencies. Generally, after the staging of the parliamentary session, all of them are oblivious of their roles as Child MPs as they are not trained how to conduct their duties. Nor are they taught how to conduct themselves as Child MPs, regarding discipline, dignity, dressing and many other important aspects such as acquiring skills of consultation with other children, and how to represent other children.

Funding for the Children's Parliament

All the Child MPs, including the Child President, are school-going youths that cannot afford to fund their own projects. This has a crippling effect on the operation of the Children's Parliament. It is not clear who is responsible for funding the activities of the Child MPs, and current funding is evidently inadequate, as it does not allow expansion of the activities of the Children's Parliament. MPs are not informed as to who to approach with regard to the funding of their parliamentary activities.

Although the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives has been allocated responsibility for the Children's Parliament, the ministry does not have a budget and may not be able to shoulder it on its own.

Lack of programmes, representation and follow-up procedures

a) The Children's Parliament has always had only one parliament sitting per year and this has resulted in it becoming inactive and unpopular. There are no other programmes running during the course of the year, thus leaving the MPs with nothing to do. Only a few individuals who have been MPs at a certain stage have taken it upon themselves to make time for parliamentary activities. The lack of programmes has resulted in the Children's Parliament not being taken seriously.

b) Other than on this parliamentary day Child MPs were unable to stand up and speak for other children and advocate on child rights. There is nothing more painful than being unable to exercise power in order to make a change you know should or could be made. The MPs have a difficult time trying to make their views known as they do not know whom to approach or how to go about carrying out their duties. Opinions, voiced by the Child Members of Parliament, are not taken seriously, even though they may be very valuable. Two important factors affect MPs and hinder them from carrying out their duties:

   i) They lack support from influential adults who, in most cases, are unaware of their status.

   ii) When the Child MPs have attempted to access information during their tenure of office, in some cases this information has been denied them. Their request might simply have been for statistics pertaining to a disease.

c) The Children's Parliament has no clear system of follow-up procedures to take issues forward for serious consideration. No one bothers to make a follow-up after the staging of the session. This makes life even more difficult for the Child MPs who feel they have wasted an opportunity of a lifetime.

Media coverage for the Children's Parliament

The commemoration of the Day of the African Child is an important day in the history of all African countries, and Zimbabwe inaugurated the Children's Parliament to mark the importance of this day. It is, therefore, sad to note that the Children's Parliament is not given much attention.

Surprisingly, the event does not receive live coverage as do other important events in the country. It is usually days, weeks, or even months, before the whole session is on national television. One begins to think the session has been postponed so that all the children are able to watch it but, the sad fact is, this is not so. When the coverage of this session finally goes on the air, it is during schooldays, and most students – especially those in boarding schools – are unable to watch it. Prior to the session itself, little publicity is given to the event.

Documentation and accountability

While we were researching this document to put it together, we approached the responsible authorities to ask for records of former Child MPs, so as to contact and interview them. Much to our surprise the records were very limited. This lack of information restricted our research.

Only two parliamentary Hansards have been published for the Children's Parliament since its formation. Both these publications were produced late. This meant that whatever problems the Child MPs had presented, with the expectation of receiving a response from adult colleagues, enabling them to attempt to address problems and initiate programmes, came to naught. If delays are encountered, then actions are delayed, and thus problems from a previous year are carried forward and directed at a whole new Children's Parliament the following year.

There is no register kept of past or present Child MPs. They are almost totally unaccounted for. It would seem that they are of no value to their constituencies.

Recommendations

We have felt it necessary to give some recommendations of the way we think the Children's Parliament may be helped to improve, functionally. Our recommendations are a result of our experiences as members of the parliament.

1. Selection of Child MPs and a Child President

The responsible authority to formulate the criteria for the selection of the Child President and Child MPs that would be uniform throughout the country. These would be along the following lines:

- Members chosen to represent a constituency should originate from that very constituency so as to attain true representation.

  Children interviewed on the question of representation clearly stated:

  'If someone is chosen to represent a constituency, they should know all about the area and familiarise themselves with the people'.

  'MPs have to be known to the children they represent and communicate with them'.

- It is advisable to choose two members from each constituency, one being a student and the other being a recent school-leaver. In so doing, the Children's Parliament can be seen as a body that caters for the concerns of all young people, including those out of school.
- Interviews to be a prerequisite element of the selection process. Provincial officials and school heads to be tasked to carry out interviews and be provided with laid-down procedures and standards for interviews – being the same for all the regions of the country. This would assist in standardising the method of selection.

Interviewees were of the opinion that:

'Child MPs should be selected professionally and in a uniform way throughout the country so as to have people of the same calibre. Even though I am not sure which aspects should be considered, I still recommend that selection be uniform'.

- The selected representatives, if possible, should be solemnly sworn into office in order to encourage enthusiasm and dedication.
- It is also important to give them a concise description of their office and their roles and responsibilities as young leaders.

When asked what they considered to be the role of a Child MP, a group of children responded, thus:

'To represent other children'.

'To represent their people and their opinions'.

'To inspire other children and give them hope and direction'.

'To represent other children by presenting their problems in parliament'.

'Child MPs should have a role similar to those of adult MPs; the only difference being that they concentrate more on issues affecting children'.

- The involvement of out-of-school youths has also to be seriously looked into as this has become a concern for many. Out-of-school youths, especially those who did not do well at school and are not working, have been generally considered to be people of a notorious nature.

During our discussion with form four students at Binga Secondary School, one girl said to us:

'It is much too risky to involve out-of-school youths as some of them are into drugs and do a lot of things that are despised by society. Besides, how can they be selected to be MPs when they are not in the school system?'

One has to consider that there are several categories of out-of-school youths and children. We have identified the following:

1. Those who have not been fortunate enough to afford an education.
2. School drop-outs.
3. Youths who obtained employment soon after high school.
4. Youths who could not find jobs after completing their studies.

With the above categories in mind, would one say it is right not to listen to the voices of youths who are out of school? It is unfair to totally disregard them because they are not in the school system. However, it is true that some youths out of school are notorious. Therefore, it is important to come up with a set of rules for the selection of MPs from this particular group. There are many of them with leadership qualities. Some are youth leaders in church, some are Sunday school teachers, others have joined or have formed performing arts groups etc. If the notorious ones cannot be chosen to become Child MPs they can be allowed to participate in the activities of the Children's Parliament. Such a move may help people understand why they behave the way they do and, most importantly, they may assist in changing them.

2. Deliberations

a) While it is important to have the President of Zimbabwe attend the parliamentary session, it is also of vital importance to stage the session on the 16th of June each year – on the commemoration of the Day of the African Child. This will help maintain the value of the activities of this day, and will conscientize every Zimbabwean as regards child rights issues. We sincerely hope that the officials responsible for keeping the President's 'diary' will be able to assist in trying their best to make his presence possible, as this also gives the whole event importance and national recognition.

b) Child MPs have often complained about being made to share rooms according to the constituencies they represent. Since the Child MPs will be coming from different regions in the country, the languages they speak differ and if they are made to share rooms because of this, tribal groups will be formed and they will start to address each other as maNdebele or maShona. This would mean that they would not interact. It is understood that, in 1999, some Child MPs almost fought because of tribal disparities.

c) The rehearsals, taking place on the day before the parliamentary session are unfortunately not given enough time, considering the importance of the commemoration. The parliamentarians should be given more time to discuss the theme in order to avoid repetition of some points of view, while others remain unmentioned.

3. Education of Child MPs and Child President

We urge the responsible authorities to take it upon themselves to undertake programmes that will educate the Child MPs concerning their leadership and representational roles. Once in this position, the Child MPs will be able to effectively address all issues pertaining to child rights and, in so doing, will be able to fully represent other children. Child MPs should be able to meet and share ideas and suggest possible means of combating problems. It is of vital importance to train Child MPs in skills of listening, speaking, documentation and advocacy. These skills are very useful for consultation with other children. Training on child rights issues will give them a better understanding of their roles, and the ability to identify and deal with problems.

Asked what he thought the reason to be why Child MPs had never visited his school, a boy from Porta Farm responded:

'They probably do not consult with us because Porta Farm is an informal settlement and we will not be living here for good'.

In such a situation, if an MP is not trained on how to consult with children, he may give the wrong impression or, worse still, he may unknowingly offend such a child. It is therefore important that Child MPs be trained how to consult with children from different backgrounds and societies, be they disabled, marginalised or disadvantaged and, in so doing, every child will be represented.

A large percentage of Zimbabwean children do not know what their rights are, and it is the duty of Child MPs to give information pertaining to these. This can only be done if the Child MPs are well informed on child rights. During our research we made a rather sad discovery: none of the primary schoolchildren at Pashu knew anything about the Children's Parliament.

A seven-year-old boy, when asked what he thought was the role of a Child MP, said:

'The Child MPs and President arrest children who are naughty'.

If a Child MP had visited Pashu Primary School, with the intention of consulting with the children there, this boy who gave us the above response definitely would not have been willing to speak. The question is, how many more children have this same picture of the Children's Parliament? The Child MPs have to receive some education on how to go about their duties, and how best to inform children of what the Parliament is all about; they have to know when and how the Children's Parliament came to be, and for what reason.

4. Funding for the Children's Parliament

Another factor that has greatly contributed to the Children's Parliament becoming inactive is the lack of adequate funding. This problem cannot be solved by the government alone, as it has its own financial constraints. It would therefore be much easier, and more useful, to help the Child MPs identify sources that may be able to assist, through donations. The Child

MPs could start their own fundraising projects.

Once they have their own budget, whether as Child MPs or as the whole parliament, then the activities of the Children's Parliament's will come to life. The problem of running programmes will also be solved. Relevant ministries, for example, those of Health and Child Welfare; Education, Sport and Culture; Finance; Labour and Social Welfare, to name but a few, should at least financially support the activities of the Children's Parliament, rather than leave everything to the one ministry presently responsible for the Children's Parliament. These have been referred to as 'relevant' ministries because, in one way or another, they advocate child rights.

A boy from Porta Farm asked us the following question:

'If the Child MPs and President want to go and help children in another part of the country, who provides them with transport?'

We asked the other children who they thought provided transport for the Child MPs and Child President. Some said 'it is the government'. One boy was of the opinion that the parliamentarians 'lack resources' since he had never before seen any of them at Porta Farm. The boy was right. He reasoned that if the parliamentarians are only children, then they would never be able to fund themselves in doing their duties.

5. Media coverage for the Children's Parliament

Live media coverage of the parliamentary session would be a big step towards publicising the Children's Parliament. If the session receives live coverage and the Day of the African Child celebrations are made sufficiently well-known to the public then the Children's Parliament will become something all Zimbabweans will look upon seriously. This is also one sure way of capturing the interest of potential donors.

The Child MPs, on the other hand, will feel their importance and this will motivate them to do all they can regarding child rights. Advertising the event, prior to the Day of the African Child celebrations, on television, in the press and on radio, will increase public awareness and build interest. The parliamentary session is bound to make more impact if broadcast in full, rather than showing clips of a few parliamentarians which will seem as if they are attending some other function.

It is also wise to provide ongoing media coverage of the activities of the Child MPs throughout the year so as to keep the public aware of the activities of the Children's Parliament and its relevance to society. This can be done by fitting issues, related to the Children's Parliament, into the already existing media infrustructure, for instance radio and television programmes such as 'Insight', 'Issues and Views', 'Teen Scene' and 'Youth for Real'.

Some form four students at Binga Secondary School in Matabeleland North Province said they had heard of a Children's Parliament, but did not know what it was all about.

A 17-year-old boy from Mutorashanga, who was not aware of the existence of a Children's Parliament before we met him, said to us:

'I personally do not expect anything from the Children's Parliament, basically because I do not know anything about it. Even now that I do know about it, I still do not expect anything from children I have never met. I would want to meet them in person so that we get to at least see each other, create a relationship, before we can discuss our problems. I think the Child MPs and President should devise a way of "advertising" themselves so that we know them'.

A girl we spoke to in Mutare had a different view from that expressed above:

'Even though I did not know anything about the Children's Parliament, from what you have told me, I would expect the Child MPs and President to help lessen incidents of child abuse, and facilitate a general betterment of the lives of children who are suffering. To achieve this, they have to be known to all children and adults.'

Media coverage can do a great deal in terms of making the Children's Parliament better known and, hence, there will be more participation amongst children outside the parliament.

We interviewed an MP from the 1999 parliamentary session, a girl from Binga Secondary School, who said that she was impressed

by the existence of a Children's Parliament in the country, but had one comment:

'Why is it that the commemoration of the Day of the African Child has not been declared a national holiday?'

If people do not work, or go to school on this day, they will pay more attention to the events taking place and, in this way, the Children's Parliament session – being the biggest event marking the day – will receive all due recognition.

6. Representation and follow up

It would be ideal to choose one or two adult representatives to assist the Children's Parliament. We mentioned earlier that the MPs do not know whom to approach, and if someone does represent them then they would be able to function more meaningfully.

The recommended adult representative will carry forward all the concerns of the Children's Parliament. In instances where the Child MPs or Child President would wish to meet with Ministers and other important people, the representative will then facilitate these meetings. There may be cases when the Children's Parliament may need adult representation. This is the reason why we recommend an adult representative. The person for this post would definitely have to be someone who has worked with children for a long time and be well-versed in child rights issues. These qualities would enable the adult representative to guide and advise the Child MPs on how best to do what is expected of them.

Soon after the parliamentary session, MPs should be able to begin their mission in the communities from which they originate and, most importantly, the person tasked to make a follow-up to their activities and to guide them has to be seen to be doing his job.

Even though the parliamentarians can effectively carry out their duties, people will still want to 'know' the adult who is guiding them; this is only natural of any society. No one bothers to respond to the issues raised by the Child MPs other than the ministers who attend the parliamentary session on that one day.

One of the children we spoke to in Binga was very concerned about this lack of response:

'How come we never see any government officials responding to the concerns of junior parliamentarians on television as they do with so many other issues, such as gender equity.'

This, to us, is a challenge to all concerned with child rights issues. A platform has been provided for the children to speak out for themselves. All one has to do is listen and take appropriate action.

7. Documentation and accountability

Records of the Children's Parliament are important for future reference. This calls for the safekeeping of these records. The records constitute the history of the Children's Parliament, and it is important to know who did what and when. With records, one is able to point out the faults, and be aware of the improvements made over the years, and know whether the idea of a Children's Parliament is paying off, or not, in terms of advocating child rights.

Once the Children's Parliament becomes active, it will not be a problem to identify and account for Child MPs. It is our hope that future Child MPs will be as well known as our leaders and other prominent people. We hope they will be able to effectively work hand-in-hand with their adult colleagues.

Often, it is difficult to accept things that are said by word of mouth. Producing more pamphlets and other information material on the Children's Parliament is one way that will convince the general public of its legitimacy.

8. Running programmes

As mentioned earlier, the Child MPs and Child President, together with their colleagues from their constituencies, should initiate their own programmes.

These programmes should be those that advocate the child rights with which they are comfortable. Child MPs may hold mini parliamentary sessions at regional level to help combat problems that affect children in

that particular region. These could be held over weekends in order not to disrupt their school curriculum. We recommend quarterly parliamentary sessions to be held in Harare, for all the regions, to discuss issues affecting children both at regional and national level. Strategies on how to consult with other children and the combating of problems may be worked out at these sessions.

Initiating and running programmes would definitely keep the Children's Parliament going, and would fully occupy the Child MPs as far as their parliamentary duties are concerned.

Child MPs may devote part of their holidays to carrying out their duties. Activities may include fundraising through sponsored walks, campaigns and youth workshops to discuss any issues that may be of concern. These will benefit all the children involved. The production of a newsletter is another way of making sure of the activities of the parliament being known to more people. Through the newsletter, younger children, and those who are not Child MPs, will be able to participate.

> When asked 'What do you expect from the Children's Parliament?' a group of children said:
>
> *'To help lessen incidents of child abuse'.*
>
> *'A general betterment of children's lives'.*
>
> *'To come up with programmes that assist children in difficult circumstances'.*
>
> *'Create a spirit of togetherness amongst youth and encourage them to discuss issues affecting them'.*

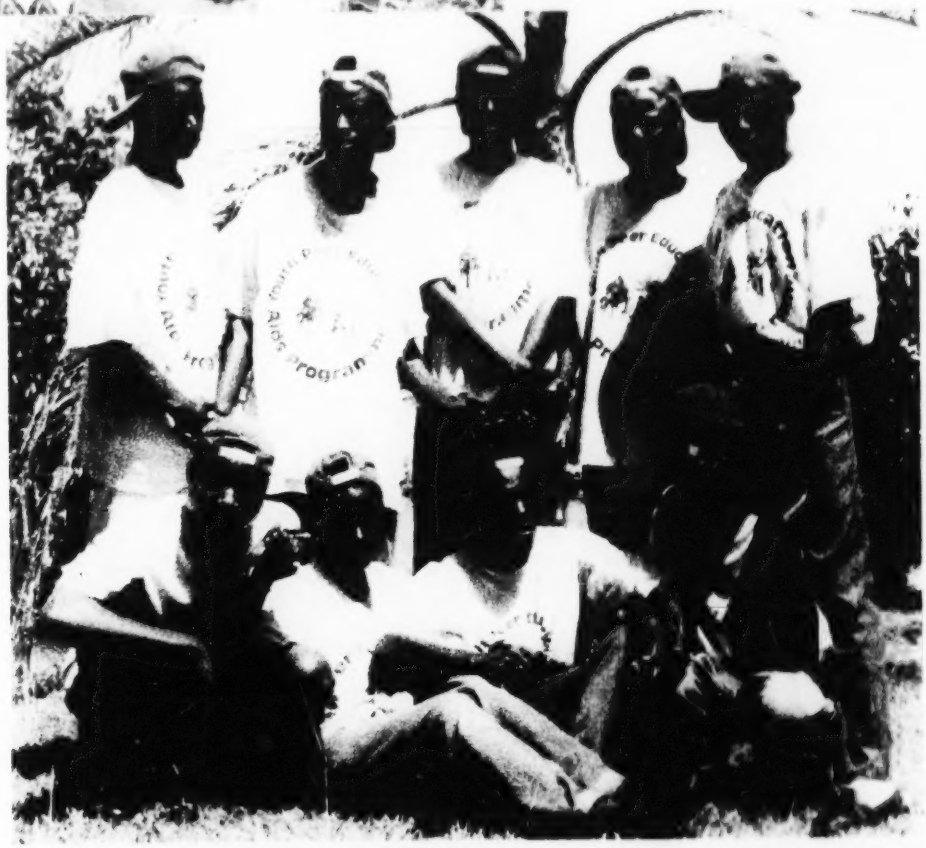
Pre-school children could participate by sending in drawings, and these could be featured in the newsletter. We have found drawings more suitable in the case of pre-school children due to the fact that, normally, when they submit poetry, it is not their own, but is written for them either by parents or teachers.

Very few disabled children have been able to participate in the activities of the Children's Parliament. Programmes that involve all children, no matter their race, tribe or physical capability should be initiated.

Chiedza Matereke is a first-year chemistry student at the Midlands State University. She has only 'heard' of the Children's Parliament but really does not care what it is all about because, according to her, it is mere 'propaganda'. The problem is that she does not even want to hear what it is all about and, frankly, does not care. When asked to comment on children's rights her response was:

'I know children have rights but, whatever these rights are, I don't know them. I never had them and I don't think children should be allowed to become politically wild. Anyway, I am 18 and really don't care.

The question is, how many more Zimbabweans are there with an attitude like this, and are you one of them? If so, what are we going to do about it?



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Conclusion

We hope that as you put down this booklet today, you will have made the decision to make a personal effort to assist the Children's Parliament to become a success.

It is our hope that, one day, every Zimbabwean will be able to listen to the plight of all children who are exposed to the negative forces in life. We hope for a world in which children participate unreservedly—a world with no room for tokenistic child participation.

We have high hopes for every child, and would like the Children's Parliament to touch the lives of all in advocating child rights. It is a platform with the potential of making children more aware of the issues affecting them. At the same time, it will provide them with the opportunity to express themselves, and possibly enable them to find solutions to their problems.

We see this booklet as only the beginning of a process – a process that can only develop if those who can help will take its contents into serious consideration.

Save The Children (UK)

Save The Children (UK) was founded in 1919 by Eglantyne Jebb, who subsequently drafted the declaration of Children's Rights which was adapted by the United Nations in 1924. The charter has been the basis of SCF's beliefs and actions ever since, and in 1969 it was enshrined into international law as the cornerstone of the UN convention on the rights of the children (CRC).

SCF has been involved in development activities in Zimbabwe since independence, working mainly with marginalized groups. It supported the government's drive to restore health services to communal areas after the disruptive years of war, and this led to a broad-based community health programme which continued through the 1980s.

Child rights is an integral part of all SCFs work. SCF advocates at national, provincial, district and community levels for the principles of the CRC and other relevant instruments to be adhered to.

Other SCF activities in Zimbabwe include:

- **HIV/AIDS** programmes to promote behavioural change and provide outreach support.
- **Community Based Management of Water** in the Zambezi Valley.
- Involving and targeting children in the **Zambezi Valley Community Development Programme**.

The Riskmap Programme which assesses the vulnerability of household food security to drought and other environmental hazards. In all of these activities, SCF responds to and supports the work of Zimbabweans' own initiatives for development.

For information about this and other SCF publications contact us at

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Our right to be

VOICES FROM CHILD PARLIAMENTARIANS IN ZIMBABWE

"It is ten years since the Children's Parliament was in place, and yet most Zimbabweans have virtually no idea of the significance of this event, or know anything about this institution. In this document, we seek to enlighten our fellow countrymen who are still in the dark."

"Our Right To Be Heard" outlines a vision as to how the Children's Parliament can become a more powerful, representative and effective forum to advocate for children's rights in Zimbabwe. Written by a group of current and former child parliamentarians it is meant to provoke critical comment and reflection, and prompt a start among policy makers, ministry officials, non-governmental organizations and young people themselves in ensuring that this institution lives up to the high ideals that informed its creation.

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